
Human Rights Watch uses barbed missiles against Sri Lanka

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Like the proverbial pig sticking its snout into swill, Human Rights Watch has leapt with glee onto the recent declaration by the Sri Lankan government that its security forces "have been instructed to end the use of heavy weapons". HRW has immediately concluded that "By finally admitting it has been using heavy weapons all along, the Sri Lanka government has shed light onto its official deception as well as its brutal military tactics."

This was the delightfully dense Brad Adams, who does not understand that not only was the government using heavy weapons, it has indeed reported regularly on its achievements through such means. The point the government had been making was that it was not using heavy weapons on civilians, and indeed its recent magnificent achievement in breaching one of the walls the LTTE had built up, and thus ensuring that over 100,000 civilians could get to safety, was without the use of heavy weapons as pointed out at the time. Had Brad Adams understood the use of the English language, he would have realized that the government has made clear that it will continue with its efforts to rescue civilians, and this will involve the use of appropriate, and proportionate, weaponry. Though this had been the principle it had adopted in rescuing civilians from the safe zone and elsewhere, previously it had not eschewed the use of heavy weapons in defence. Just a couple of weeks back it had publicized its removal of LTTE heavy artillery which had been firing out of the safe zone. This was not done by snipers or even catapults, but involved precision bombing by the air force, and there was no reason whatsoever to conceal such action. Similarly, when the LTTE used its tank to fire on fleeing civilians, the forces had an obligation to stop such action. Unfortunately they do not seem to have succeeded in this, but this means that, if at any point the LTTE resorts to such tactics again, the forces too will have to respond in kind to save civilian lives. However, since the LTTE has now announced a unilateral ceasefire, it is to be hoped that they will refrain from using such heavy weaponry against civilians and against the aid that is being sent in – there were reports a couple of weeks back, it will be remembered, of firing on a food ship, and all the ICRC said then was that they did not think the ship had been actually targeted. If the LTTE sticks to its word, there will therefore be no need for government to use heavy weapons at all. However, if the LTTE does use heavy weapons, it would not make sense for government to nevertheless continue with its moratorium, and try to deal with anti-aircraft guns or tanks with the slingshots and catapults that Mr. Adams might advocate. Offensive operations have stopped, as they should be while so many civilians are being used as human shields. However that does not take away from the moral obligation to release those civilians, and that is what the government has said it will continue to attempt. Mr Adams may think this his cue to engage in tendentious interpretation that betrays his ignorance of facts, and his Luddite understanding of what war means in the modern age. We can only hope that the visiting Foreign Ministers, Mr. Kouchner and Mr. Miliband, the current Castor and Pollux of NATO and of Western operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere, will not fall in with this sanctimonious finger-pointing. Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process